

PIECEWORK



Burlington quilter Mildred Ross points to the green print fabric she used in her first sewing project, when she was 12—a dress made for her mother. Scraps ended up in a Tumbling Blocks quilt, one of many quilts Ross has made over the years.

BY MILLIE FRESE

Fabric scraps and feed sacks led me to Mildred Ross's doorstep on a sunny November morning nearly a year ago.

At a rummage sale held in conjunction with a Burlington quilt show, I had purchased two plastic bags stuffed with soft cotton remnants from feed sacks. I planned to use them to make a period quilt from authentic fabric. Since the 19th century, women had recycled the white fabric from feed, flour, and sugar sacks into their own sewing projects. (At the 1914 Iowa State Fair, in fact, a contest for making items out of Occident Flour sacks resulted in 1,200 entries—from children's rompers and pajamas, to card table covers and dresser scarves.) Once the company name and logo was bleached out, the soft cotton fabric was often dyed and then cut and sewn into clothing, quilts, sunbonnets, pillowcases, tablecloths, and dozens of other items. Well aware of women's need and desire

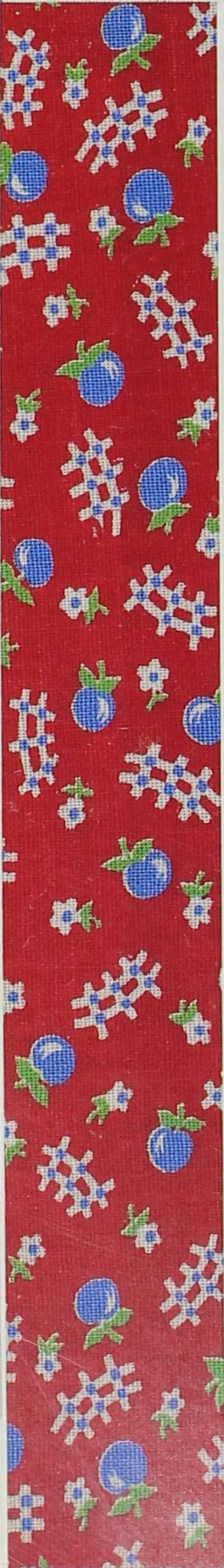

for bright fabrics, manufacturers sometime around 1925 started selling their flour, sugar, tobacco, and feed in patterned sacks, with company names and logos printed on adhesive labels that could easily be pulled off. Sizes varied; the largest sacks were about 36" x 44" after they were split open. Because the scraps I had bought were brightly patterned, I knew they probably dated to sometime after 1925 and therefore I could select a quilt pattern from the same era.

Heaped on my dining room table, the mound of sacking scraps represented stories begging to be told. Among the dozens of bright prints was a design of yellow and red baby shoes on a white background. The piece had been used for a child's garment. Ironing it flat, I traced the line in the sack where the armholes, shoulder seams, and neckline had been cut out. The child who wore the outfit would be an adult now. Sewing clothes from recycled fabric during economic

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Ross hand-pieced this quilt from feed sacks and cutting scraps, as she minded her parents' hatchery in 1958. Called Tumbling Blocks, the quilt pattern creates the illusion of cubes when seen from one angle, or six-pointed stars from another angle.



depression or world war, did the maker dream while she worked that the child would grow up to know better times?

Unfolding a burgundy fabric scattered with pink and white flowers, I discovered a sleeve piece for an adult-sized blouse or dress. Perhaps the seamstress had cut this piece incorrectly, or maybe it was for a garment she never finished. A couple of the sacks were still uncut. Perforations remained along the edges, indicating where the sacks had been chain-stitched shut. Some of the pieces were too small to use for even the tiniest quilt piece. But they hadn't been too small for someone to save.

As I cut pieces for my own quilt from the feed sack scraps I had bought at the rummage sale, it was obvious that my quilt would be sewn from pieces of another woman's life.

Curious about who had given the scraps to the rummage sale, I soon tracked down the donor. Mildred Ross lives on the southeast side of Burlington, in a two-story yellow house with an inviting front porch. I paid her a call.

"My parents had a hatchery in Burlington," Ross explained when I asked how she had acquired the feed sacks. She worked in the hatchery until she married Tom Ross in 1941. After her marriage she still kept the books for her parents' business.

"Mom saved all the feed sacks from the store and from our farm," Ross explained. There were seven cartons of uncut feed sacks—washed, pressed, and ready for use—among her mother's possessions when she moved to a nursing home. "I sold lots of them to go towards her keep," Ross said. "I still have 85 upstairs. Don't ask me why I kept them."

Born in 1917, Ross taught herself how to sew when she was eleven. Sewing was a necessity when she was young, she explained, but it was also something she loved to do.


When she was 12, she made all the clothes for herself and her mother and sister for a trip to Colorado. Her mother and grandmother both quilted, and she recalls many quiet nights growing up, listening to the radio "of an evening" and doing handwork.

One of the first things she constructed was a green print dress for her mother. "I laid one of her old dresses on top of the fabric and cut around it for a pattern." Her mother wore the dress until, as Ross says, "there was nothing left of it."

Nothing, that is, except for the cutting scraps Ross saved for piecing quilts. "I still have a piece of the fabric in one of my quilts," she said. She unfolded a Tumbling Blocks quilt and caressed away the wrinkles. As her fingers paused over diamond pieces, more stories surfaced.

"My daughter Mary wore a skirt made out of this on her first day of school," Ross said, pointing to a bright yellow fabric with red cherries. "This was a piece of one of my daughter Carol's dresses. And here's a piece of the green print from Mother's dress," she continued. "There are feed sack pieces in here, too. I could go on and on."

Ross pieced the Tumbling Blocks quilt in 1958 from scraps she had saved over the years. Her father had fallen ill, and once again she was called upon to mind the Rieke hatchery. Her intertwining roles as daughter, wife, and mother are stitched into the tumbling blocks. Her daughter Carol traced with pencil around a cardboard diamond pattern (with sandpaper glued to one side so the pattern wouldn't slip on the fabric), then cut out pieces one by one (with scissors, Ross pointed out, in contrast to the quick-cutting rotary blades that quilters



use today). Ross sewed the pieces together by hand when business was slow at the hatchery. The mosaics of diamonds create the illusion of three-dimensional cubes. But from another angle, the cubes disappear and eight-point stars emerge. "Even though you look at it a long time, there's still something new to see," Ross said.

Her first bed quilt was an appliquéd Sunbonnet Sue made when she was 16. "Of course, it's much loved," she said of her first quilt—a euphemism for worn, faded, showing signs of age. There are baby quilts and bedspreads made for her own children. Like her sunbonnet quilt, they too are much loved.

In telling the stories of weddings, births, deaths, and quiet evenings at home, Ross's quilts become metaphors for life. Sometimes the pieces don't fit together exactly right, or the fabric isn't what you'd choose—it's what you have on hand.

"To me, scrap quilts are more fun to make," she said. "It's a challenge to put them together and coordinate colors you might not put together anywhere else, but it works in the quilt. And I'm 'Scotch,'" she adds with a smile. "If I've got all that fabric I've saved, I don't want to go buy more." Except, she conceded, when she needed some purple for a quilt. "If I need purple and never sewed with purple, I'll buy maybe a quarter of a yard."

The artist in her emerges as she takes the scraps she has on hand and turns them into what she wants them to be. "Quilting is an art form, but it used to be a necessity. My mother

and grandma quilted because they needed the covers. I don't think they thought of quilts as art. When a quilt got old they put it between the coil springs and the mattress so the springs wouldn't rub holes in the mattress. I'd never do that with one of my quilts."

For Ross, sewing was a necessity as she made clothes for her family. She made baby quilts, clothing, tablecloths, sheets, pajamas,

dish towels, aprons — "all the things you need fabric for to make a home"—from feed sacks during the war because Americans couldn't buy new fabric. "They fade if the sun hits them or they're washed much," Ross said. "Feed sacks are strong—but we were real glad when you could buy fabric at the store again."

Later, sewing became a source of income as she sewed for

others. "Young women would come to me with a box of fabric for a wedding," she recalled. "Three months later I could see all that beauty going down the aisle and know that I created it."

Ross is precise—she can recall exactly how much she paid for quilting needles (she prefers platinum plated), or for an English thimble to replace the one she'd worn a hole through from quilting. She knows the price of a spool of quilting thread and can tell you how many spools (and the equivalent yardage)



The first quilt Mildred Ross made was a Sunbonnet Sue pattern (detail above). The border on this page and the next are feed sack scraps that Ross had saved.



went into the whitework quilt she recently completed. She remembers that it took one large feed sack to make a full apron, two to make pajama pants ("They made pretty pajamas that were so soft," Ross said), and three for an adult-sized dress. She split feed sacks in half to make dish towels (which she still uses), and sewed two feed sacks together to make picnic table cloths. One feed sack made a pillowcase, and if you could get two alike you'd have a matching pair for a double bed. Ross still uses ironing board covers made from recycled feed sacks. "Cut them cattywampus [on the bias] so they stretch better," she explained, "then sew elastic around the edge."

Quilting is an art Ross uses, lives with, lives through. She doesn't handle her quilts with white cotton gloves or store them in acid-free boxes. She uses them, loves them, washes them in her washing machine, hangs them on the clothesline to dry, and gives them away, though sometimes it's hard to let them go. So much time and so much of the maker are invested in the work.

Some quilts, stored in pillowcases in her closet (never store them in plastic, she warns),

are tagged with slips of paper on which she has written the names of relatives who will receive them. One quilt is for a granddaughter's wedding. "The girl is 13—I don't know if I'll still be around when she gets married, but I want her to have some of my work," Ross said.


Others will be presented as gifts when the time is right.

Ross's quilts mark milestones in the life of her family. Her sewing embodies beauty and memories, the pleasure of joyous times, the process of working through difficult and sometimes painful times. Next to her family photo albums sits an album filled with carefully labeled photographs of all the quilts she's made and of family quilts she's restored. "This is Johnny's quilt," she said of the first photograph in her quilt album. "Johnny stayed with us since he was one month old while his mom taught school. He was especially close to Tom."

Johnny's Shoo Fly quilt was made in 1986 from scraps of his grandfather's shirts and pajamas. "Tom was sick for 26 months with cancer and couldn't talk the last 18 months of his life. Making that quilt together was a healing process for Johnny and I." Johnny, who was eight years old when his grandfather died, attended the elementary school near her home. "He'd come



Ross patiently quilts a top appliquéd in the 1920s.



here for lunch and lay out blocks on the floor before he'd go back to school. I'd sew them together in the afternoon.

"Januarys—because that's when my husband died—are still 'blah' months for me. So I usually piece a quilt in January and February, then lay it aside until the notion strikes me and I want to quilt."

When I visited her, she was quilting a top given to her in the 1960s. "I got it out every once in a while, then put it back. Now the time is right and I'm finishing it." It's an appliqué pattern of flowers and butterflies with embroidered details. Like most handmade quilts, it quietly whispers stories of its maker. Ross explained that it was appliquéd in the 1920s by a Burlington woman who died in 1932. It was given to the woman's daughter—Ross's neighbor—who hemmed the edges and used it as a bedspread, but never quilted it.

Ross received the quilt top when her neighbor died in 1965. "Daisy Paschal was my neighbor across the alley, and she was an army nurse during World War I. I think a lot about her now as I work on this quilt," Ross said. She points out the tiny, even appliqué stitches, evidence that the maker was experienced in her art. "I admire appliqué, but I don't like to do it!"

She added a border to the quilt top, using fabric from her own mother's scrap bag. "It's from the 1920s, too," she said of the lavender fabric that blends perfectly with the flowers and butterflies. There are a few tiny blood spots on the quilt top, probably from a needle pricking the maker's finger decades ago.

"Seventy-year-old blood spots are difficult to remove," Ross laughed. "I've tried peroxide and everything else I can think of. Maybe I'll

embroider lazy daisies over the spots. Or maybe I'll just let them be."

The lives and work of women mingle across generations in the fabric, work, and art of a quilt. On Ross's beds, in her closets and cedar chests, are quilts with the thread of history running through them, showcasing beauty and skill that have transformed fragments, scraps, and rags into a storehouse of memories.

As Ross says: "You've seen the story of my life."

Now I add my own stories, my own memories, to Ross's feed sack scraps as I appliqué wreaths of flowers on the quilt I am making. Feed sacks were before my time, but to me they represent conversations with my grandfather about living through difficult times. I asked him once (while I was contemplating choices for my future) why he chose to become a truck driver. His reply: "During the depression you took whatever job you could get and you were damn thankful."

Sometimes 'making do' transforms life's scraps into a memorable life. Sometimes making do transcends life and becomes art. ❖

The author, Millie Frese, is the editor of The Goldfinch (Iowa's history magazine for children, published by the State Historical Society of Iowa) and an avid quilter.

